

The Intruder

BY MARJORIE BOWEN

AS she stood on the threshold of the home that was his and would soon (so soon!) be hers, her heart was filled with a noble happiness.

She paused, with a delicate hesitation, delaying a moment of yet deeper joy that she might dwell on it with a longer delight, beside the ancient cypress that hugely overshadowed the long terrace, and looked at the beautiful outlines of Fordyce Hall. Turrets and gables, the work of different builders in different ages, showed dark and clear against an autumn sky of golden gray, and beyond the house miles of lushed wood and parkland swept to the misty horizon.

Below the terrace where Ann Vereker stood, the gardens dipped in old and perfect arrangement of walk and fountain, rosary and quidnunc, arbor and bowling-green. The bright, large flowers of the late year glowed against the worn stone and the rich lawns; there was nothing to disturb the ordered loveliness that had been so wisely planned and so long-enduring. "And in this place I shall be his wife," thought Ann.

She looked at him as he paused a few paces away from her; he stood in the shadow of the cypress, and was gazing past the gardens to the fair, open prospect beyond. She had never seen him in these surroundings before; always their background had been a town—London, Bath, the Wells, a fashionable world, gaiety, a crowd—the proper natural setting for those born to aristocratic ease. A country life was not the mode, and it had not seemed strange to Ann that Sir Richard made no suggestion of showing her his home until their betrothal was nearly at an end.

Yet she had always longed for this moment, always wished to see him in the place where he belonged, where he was master—the place where he was born, and his fathers born before him back to the time of the first Norman king.

It was more beautiful than she had

expected, he was more completely one with this setting than she had pictured. Suddenly all the time they had spent together in London seemed wasted; she thought coldly of the town mansion that was being refurnished.

"We will live here," she decided.

She looked at the open door through which she had not yet passed, and then again at him.

"Dick," she said, and her voice was low, "how long is it since you were here?"

"Three years," he answered, quietly.

"Why did you never bring me before?" asked Ann.

He looked at her and seemed to brace himself.

"Oh, my dear," he said—"my dear!" He raised his hand and let it fall as if dismissing a subject impossible of expression.

She noticed then that he was unusually grave—she remembered that he had been grave ever since they had left her brother in the coach in obedience to her wish to see the place alone with him, and they entered the grounds together.

"Did you think I would not care?" she asked. It occurred to her that perhaps he thought her frivolous—that perhaps he had not read her intense desire to take her position and future responsibilities seriously. Her sensitive, mobile face flushed; she leaned her slender figure against the warm, hard stone of the terrace and fixed her eyes on the house; she trembled with the desire to convey to him what she felt for this house of his and all the tradition it stood for. His race had bred fine, useful men and women; she wanted to tell him that she would be worthy of them.

But he was so silent that her delicate desires were abashed. "Shall we go into the house?" she said.

"Ah yes," he answered. "I hope, Ann, that you will like it," he added; and she smiled, for it seemed to her that

his tone was a very formal one to be used between such complete friends and lovers as they were; but it did not displease her; she liked the surprises his moods afforded, she was even glad of his present gravity; she felt reserved herself in her own deep happiness.

They walked along the terrace to the side door that stood open; the sunlight had parted the gray veil of clouds and lay lightly over the steps as Ann Vereker ascended them and entered Fordyce Hall.

In accordance with her wish there were no servants to welcome them. "Let me be quite alone with you for the first time," she had said, and he had acceded to her whim without comment.

She had always been exquisite in her observation and keen in her perceptions, and since she had met Richard Fordyce she had known the great sharpening of the senses a strong passion brings; colors, sounds, light, and perfume were now to her so many ecstasies, almost unbearable in their poignancy. And all that he now revealed to her—the fine corridors, the great dining-room, the ball-room, the old carving, the old painted ceilings, the old tapestries, the old furniture—gave her a pleasure that deepened to pain.

In the deep oriel window his quarters showed, and the bearings of the various heiresses who had at one time or another graced the name of Fordyce. In the dining-room hung the portraits of his ancestors, men and women who seemed strangely remote and aloof, and who yet shared his dear traits in their dark, masterful features. An atmosphere of loneliness and desertion hung heavy in these rooms, but that did not sadden Ann; she felt the place was state-ly with memories—chambers where so many had lived and died must convey this air of regret. She hushed her footsteps and her voice, and thought that this house peopled with shadows of past achievements would make a worthy background for a warm and living love.

They had not gone above the ground floor when he led her to the great hall and state entrance, and, opening the portals that were stiff on their hinges, showed her the famous view across the woodland and river, that embraced three counties.

She stood, with the soft airs blowing

her nut-brown curls beneath the wide brim of her Leghorn hat, and gazed on the entrancing prospect. Directly before her, half concealed by a little belt of elms, was a squat Norman church.

"Your church?" she questioned.

"Yes," said Sir Richard, "but it is the only church for the village, too—they come here on Sunday, but they marry and bury at Earl's Stanton, ten miles away."

She touched his arm half timidly; he did not look at her, and a faint sensation of coldness on his part tinged her happiness with apprehension.

"May I see the church now?" she asked, on a sudden impulse.

"Whatever you wish, Ann," he answered.

They crossed the open lawn and the broad drive and entered a green gate in a red wall which admitted them, not, as she expected, into the churchyard, but into a fruit garden that sloped down the side of a little hill.

The fully ripe peaches and apricots hung amid the curling leaves on the sun-burnt walls, and some had escaped the nets that held them and lay on the freshly turned earth, and clusters of St. Michael's daisies and sunflowers grow amid the plum and pear trees. Sir Richard crossed the end of the garden and opened another door in the farther wall; as he held it aside for Ann, she stepped past him and found herself among the graves.

A few yew-trees rose in still darkness from the even grass that was scattered with the scarlet berries that fell from the soughing boughs. The flat, discolored grave-stones were mostly in shade, but over those upright against the wall the misty sunshine fell in a dreamy radiance; above the wall the fruit-trees showed, and Ann noticed how the fruit had fallen and lay among the graves.

An old man was trimming the grass; at sight of Sir Richard he took off his hat and stood respectfully at attention. Ann smiled at him; this place was sacred but not sad to her; she wondered why Sir Richard had arranged their marriage for a London church—she would like to have been married here where some day she would be buried—a Fordyce among her kin.

They entered the church; it was small, old, sunken, and dedicated to a forgotten saint—Vedust. The painted glass in the windows was ancient and beautiful, the worn rood-screen had guarded the altar for two hundred years; there were some beautiful brasses in the chancel, and in the Lady Chapel a tomb in fair painted marble.

One name was repeated on brasses and marble, the name of Fordyce; as Ann Vereker stood in a reverent attitude behind the altar she saw this word again and again on tomb and tablet with varying inscriptions and titles of honor.

Among the newer mural tablets which showed white among the time-stained stones were those of his father, his mother, his sister. And, newest of all, one that made Ann catch her breath with a sense of shock.

It was the small square of alabaster dedicated to the memory of his first wife.

His first wife. Ann read the inscription:

Sacred to the Memory of Margaret, Daughter of John Basinghall of Salop and Wife of Richard Fordyce, Baronet of Fordyce, Hampshire, who died May 1725, æt. 23.

Nothing else; no word of love or regret. Ann was glad that there was no parade of mock sentiment; she had been little in his life, Ann was convinced—he never spoke of her, and Ann had tried to forget her existence, had succeeded indeed in closing her mind to all thoughts of her—what was she but an incident to be forgotten?—the wife of two years who had died without children. Yet standing here in the somber silence, Ann found herself forced to consider this woman. Somewhere near she was actually lying in her coffin. "Perhaps," thought Ann, "I am standing over her now."

She turned to Sir Richard; his face was inscrutable, his figure dark in the shadows. "Were you—" she broke off, unable to form the words: she had wanted to ask him if he had been married in this church.

It was suddenly horrible that he had ever been married before.

She glanced at their pew, and saw that to sit there would be to sit in full view of this white tablet—"Sacred to

the Memory of Margaret . . . Wife of Richard Fordyce—"

"How close the air is!" she said. "Shall we not go?"

He moved away in silence, and they came together out of the hushed church into the hushed graveyard. The sun had withdrawn behind the increasing gray vapors and would be seen no more that day; the elms that half concealed the house were shaking in a little breeze, and the yellow leaves were drifting steadily down. The place was sad—sad with an atmosphere her happiness could not defy; the air had become chill, and she shivered in her silk coat.

In the distance the old man was cleaning the moss from a headstone. It occurred to Ann that he had seen (many times!) this Margaret; she wished to stop and question him, for a great curiosity now pressed her about the woman whose existence she had hitherto been content to ignore—had this dead wife of his been dark or fair, sad or gay, beautiful or lovable?

She had heard nothing of her, she was sure that she had been an insignificant personality, but she wanted to ask the old gardener and be certain.

"How silent you are, Ann!" said Sir Richard.

She looked up at him with a little start. "So are you," she smiled.

"The day is overcast," he answered, "and a gloomy one in which to overlook an empty house."

"But I will see the rest," she interrupted—"an empty house! Your home, Dick, and mine to be."

"You like the place?" he asked.

She wanted to say so much and words were so inadequate—she wished he would look at her. "I love every stone," she said, passionately.

"We shall not be here much," replied Sir Richard, opening the gate.

"Why not?—the place lacks a master."

"Oh, it is old—and dreary—and in need of repair—"

"That can be altered," she smiled; in her heart she was wondering if he had trodden these churchyard grasses, or crossed the end of this fruit garden, since his first wife had died.

She was sure he had not; no, nor entered the house. Were old memories

holding him silent?—the thought tortured her; yet she tried to reason it away and to dispel this shadowy menace of Margaret Fordyce. She had always known that he had been married, and always been able to ignore it; in no way had it come between them. Why should it now?

Yet the old perfect happiness did not return even when they had entered the house again together; the solemn atmosphere of the ancient church seemed to lurk in the quiet rooms; she could not people them with the sweet visions of her own future and his—it was the past that seemed to fill them, and when she mounted the wide, dark stairs she pictured Margaret Fordyce going up them in her bridal dress and being carried down them in her coffin.

He took her to the armory, and she stood pale and thoughtful among the beautiful weapons with which the walls were lined; he showed her his father's sword, his own favorite weapon, and a light French rapier water-waved in gold.

"Do you fence?" he asked, as he hung the rapier back next another of the same weight and length.

"No," said Ann. He made no comment, but she knew now that his first wife had fenced with him—with those two rapiers, in this very room.

They went into the picture-gallery, and she was blind to the beauty of painting and carving, for her eyes were straining, half guiltily, half fearfully, for a portrait of Margaret Fordyce.

He showed her one after another of his ancestors, explaining their lives and actions, and when he came to the great picture of his father on horseback, with the taking of Namur in the distance, her heart was beating fast and her eyes searching furtively for a woman's face. But Margaret Fordyce was not there; yet Ann detected a bare space next to the likeness of Sir Richard's sister—as if, she thought, a painting had been hung there and removed.

It seemed that it would have only been natural for her to ask for his first wife, but she could not, though she was aware that her remarks were vague and forced; he, too, seemed absorbed in some inner thought, and did not notice her distraction.

As they came out from the picture-gallery on to the great stairs again she was struck anew by the chill and ominous atmosphere of the house. She regretted now her desire to have the house empty on her first visit; some servant or kinsman would have been a relief, some one who could have spoken casually and naturally of Margaret Fordyce.

He showed her the paintings on the stairway, and they mounted higher into a region of silence and shadows. The windows were shuttered, the blinds drawn, and the furniture in linen covers.

Without waiting for Sir Richard, Ann hurried through the first suite of rooms; she was looking still for some sign of Margaret, some portrait. These were—had been—a woman's rooms. Would she have to live in them?—to use this furniture, to gaze at herself in these mirrors?

At the end of the suite was a locked door; she tried the handle with a sudden desperation, as if she expected to find the solution of some mystery.

Sir Richard was quickly beside her. "There is nothing of interest there," he said, quietly.

She turned, and they looked at each other for the first time since they had entered the house together.

"Why may I not go in?" asked Ann.

"I did not forbid you," he said. He was pale but smiling; the expression of his face was so different from any that she had ever seen there before that he seemed to her for the moment a stranger.

"I want to go in," she said, trying to smile too, but with a bitter sensation that everything was becoming ghastly and unnatural; she endeavored to struggle against this; she had been perfectly happy a few moments ago—and nothing had happened, she told herself; *nothing had happened.*

"May I not see this room?" she asked, not knowing what impulse goaded her to insist.

Without answering, he took a key from the pocket of his brocade waistcoat. He carried the key with him, then—perhaps all the while, ever since she had known him, he had had this key to the past next his heart.

In silence he unlocked the door and in silence she entered. The chamber was

small, the air close and oppressive; the first glance showed Ann that it was a lady's apartment, and that it had been locked away hastily, with every article untouched as the former occupant had left it. Beyond was another room, the door of which was half open; Ann could see a bed, with curtains of fine needlework, and a mirror covered with a white cloth.

Dust was over everything; Ann could hardly fetch her breath; she unlatched one of the shutters, and the sad autumn light revealed the ruin wrought by time and neglect. Cobwebs clung round the windows, the gilt chairs were tarnished, dust lay gray and heavy in the folds of the curtains. On a side table was a bunch of flowers—changed to a little powder among the wired and faded ribbons of the bouquet; near it was a box of gloves half opened, the string and wrappings thrown carelessly down, the yellow, shriveled gloves unworn.

In one corner of the room stood a harpsichord, open and covered with sheets of music, some of which had fallen to the floor. Beside this, standing against the wall, was a large picture in a dark frame, concealed by a red cloak flung over it.

Ann was drawn by this picture to a forgetfulness of everything else, even to a forgetfulness of Sir Richard, who stood motionless on the threshold. She crossed the floor, and the boards creaked beneath her feet, a startled mouse sprang across her path and disappeared into the dark bedroom.

She stooped and lifted the red cloak. A woman's face looked at her from the glowing canvas.

A beautiful face, alive, alert, fair, and proud, with a peculiar triumphant smile on the lips. She was painted against a dark curtain and a glimpse of summer trees; her unpowdered hair was bound with a purple ribbon, and her brocaded dress was cut low over her jeweled bosom. The painting was stiff and precise, but marvelously lifelike and glowing in color.

In the left-hand corner was written in white letters, "Margaret Fordyce, May, 1725"—the year, the month she died.

Ann stepped back from the painting; her heart was beating thickly and the world was rapidly changing about her; she put out her hand and touched by

chance the keyboard of the harpsichord, that gave forth a dismal and jangled sound that she echoed with a low and horrified cry. Sir Richard stepped into the room.

"After three years," he said, looking round—"after three years—"

"What has happened?" murmured Ann. "What has happened?" She leaned weakly against the corner of the harpsichord and gazed still at that third presence in the room—the portrait of Margaret Fordyce.

"Why did you not tell me?" she asked, faintly. He made no defense.

"We are quite strangers," continued Ann.

He turned his eyes on her, but still did not speak.

"How did she die?" asked Ann.

"She was flung from her horse . . . on her birthday—she was wearing that cloak."

"Why did you not tell me?" repeated Ann Vereker.

"I thought—I hoped—" he broke off.

"You loved her," said Ann.

He stumbled to the bouquet and fingered the ruins of the roses.

"This is as she left it," said Ann. "You shut it away as she left it—but she is still here. In this room. In this house. In the church. How she must laugh at me!" He stared at her.

"She called you. You could not help coming here—even though it meant bringing me. I was to help you forget."

The triumphant face on the canvas seemed to deepen its disdainful smile.

"You will never forget," continued Ann. "You love her."

"She is dead," said Sir Richard, and he braced his shoulders with the action of a man who endeavors to shake off the oppression of a hideous dream. "Dead. Dead."

"She is here," repeated Ann.

Sir Richard turned his eyes fearfully, hungrily to the portrait. "Oh, God!" he said, sharply.

"This is tragedy," thought Ann. She seemed dull in a dull world; she looked across the harpsichord and noticed that the rain was falling aslant the dry leaves on the withered trees outside. When last the sun shone she had been supremely happy. What had happened?

Dressed by ALFRED KNIT



"DICK," SHE SAID, IN A HOPELESS VOICE, "I AM GOING."

Illustration by GUTH
Half-tone plate engraved by H. Leitch

Nothing . . . save that she had seen the portrait of Margaret Fordyce.

She had loved him so sincerely, and he had used this love of hers as an opiate—and now the other woman triumphed.

"Dick," she said, in a hopeless voice, "I am going."

He did not answer; the painted figure seemed to step from the frame and dominate both of them. Before her beauty,

her assurance, Ann felt insignificant, a creature who did not matter.

Sir Richard picked up one of the faded white gloves and sank onto the tarnished chair; he looked at the portrait, and Ann knew that the last three years had rolled away for him. He belonged to the other woman.

Ann Vereker, the intruder, left him with his wife and went away forever.